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SUBJECT: GOJ REFORMERS TOUT PROGRESS DURING MEETINGS WITH
S/P DIRECTOR REISS, BUT ACTIVISTS NOTE HUGE CHALLENGES
REMAIN

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Key GOJ reformers presented a positive picture to S/P Director Mitchell Reiss of Jordan's pioneering progress to implement key economic, political and social reforms, but acknowledged that significant obstacles remain. Several activists, including a former Prime Minister, are not quite as optimistic, expressing impatience at the slow pace of political reform and the GOJ's unwillingness to address fundamental inequities in society, particularly vis-a-vis the Palestinian population in Jordan. Others expressed support for the Broader Middle East initiative, and encouraged the backers not to shy away from criticism from Arab leaders. A roundtable discussion with university student leaders showed that regional political issues, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, continue to dominate the psyche of most Jordanians. End Summary.

GOJ REFORMERS TOUT PROGRESS, APPEAL FOR MORE HELP

¶12. (C) During separate meetings in Amman August 30 and 31 with visiting S/P Director Mitchell Reiss, Deputy Director Barry Lowenkron, S/P member Charles Dunne, and Charge, Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Bassem Awadallah and Justice Minister Salah al-Bashir painted an optimistic picture of the progress of Jordan's reform program, but noted the challenges ahead. Noting that he would travel to Wilton Park the next day for a conference to discuss reform issues with representatives from other Arab countries, Awadallah highlighted Jordan's pioneering role in implementing a wide-ranging reform program at home and regionally. These policies are driven by the GOJ's recognition that Jordan needs to build a modern, inclusive society free of nepotism and corruption that supports the growth of all people. For his part, Bashir noted he is spearheading a regional reform program under the auspices of the OECD in which participating Arab countries will develop pilot programs on select issues (Bashir will head the one on judicial reform, for example) that they hope to use as a model for the region.

¶13. (C) Awadallah and Bashir appealed for more U.S. assistance to help move Jordan's reform program along. Echoing FM Muasher's comments to Ambassador Reiss reported septel, Awadallah suggested that the U.S. consider tying its aid to progress on reform. Ambassador Reiss noted that Jordan is viewed as a model for reform and its support on multiple bilateral, regional and global issues is highly valued.

BUT HUGE OBSTACLES REMAIN

¶14. (C) Reflecting complaints from civil society leaders and activists, Awadallah acknowledged that the challenges are "huge." Involving youth in the process is paramount, and making sure that the economic reforms translates into improved quality of life for citizens is key. Political reform is probably one of the most difficult aspects of the reform program since "democracy only came to us in 1989." (Note: This refers to the re-establishment of Jordan's parliament by King Hussein, and other initiatives begun that year. End note.) Alluding to Jordan's election law that favors the East Bank, tribal community at the expense of Jordan's urban, majority Palestinian origin population, Awadallah (himself of Palestinian origin) said: "We don't have proportional representation... this problem stems from the (Palestinian-Israeli conflict). Until it is dealt with, we won't be a truly representational society." Bashir said that his (USAID-backed) judicial reform program is partly intended to address social ills in Jordan, such as helping empower women and children through legislation reform that supports human rights and the rule of law.

¶15. (C) Prominent Jordanian-Palestinians who met with Ambassador Reiss over lunch echoed these concerns, and highlighted the dampening effect Jordan's security apparatus has on Jordanian society. Former Senator Marwan Dardin said

that many parents discourage their children from engaging in political activity for fear it could come back to haunt them as they seek to advance in their careers (most employers require "good conduct" reports from the intelligence service before hiring someone). Interference from the intelligence apparatus in every day affairs, from choosing university administrators, to issuing permits for cultural events, to issuing work permits, has a hold on society that will be difficult to break, according to former royal court adviser (and former Ambassador to the UN) Adnan Abu Odeh.

SUPPORT FOR U.S. REFORM INITIATIVES

16. (C) Awadallah expressed support for the Broader Middle East Initiative, and believes that the U.S. strategy of consultation with regional leaders has worked to produce a better plan. He cautioned that the September BMENA ministerial in New York must be planned carefully to maintain momentum, and expressed hope that other regional countries would attend, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Awadallah advocated establishing benchmarks for progress in Arab reform, and said that Jordan would continue to push forward on this issue.

17. (C) Activists who met Ambassador Reiss over dinner expressed support for BMENA as well, and noted the evolution of the initiative that demonstrates the U.S. intends to support indigenous reform efforts already under way. During the lunch, Abu Odeh encouraged Ambassador Reiss not to give in to criticism from the region, especially from those who complain the U.S. wants to impose its will on the Arab world.

Former Prime Minister Taher al-Masri (also of Palestinian origin) echoed this sentiment, saying that the criticism is empty talk from leaders who resist change because that could mean a loss of their own power. However, Masri (and nearly every Jordanian whom Ambassador Reiss met during the course of his visit) cautioned that failure to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict will hinder regional reform efforts, and appealed for the U.S. to do more to bring peace to the region.

18. (C) While sounding support for U.S. efforts to encourage reform, through bilateral pressure if necessary, Ambassador Reiss's luncheon interlocutors said they detected a lack of momentum in U.S. efforts. One said the moment he heard U.S. officials begin to speak of supporting only "indigenous" reform efforts and moving at a pace acceptable to countries of the region, he decided USG resolve was wavering and was thus scaling back its initiative.

19. (C) The Ambassador met with student leaders who had visited the U.S. on exchange programs sponsored by the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). One student sought reassurances from Ambassador Reiss that the U.S. reform programs would remain even if there is a change in leadership after the U.S. presidential election. Another expressed his amazement that the U.S. dared to challenge Arab leaders to reform politically, something he fears they will never allow. They called for more money to be spent on exchange programs to break down cultural barriers and counter the negative and misleading images that permeate Arab and western media.

JORDANIANS PREOCCUPIED WITH REGIONAL CONFLICTS

10. (C) Awadallah said that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reflected the "collective failure" of everyone involved, and most Jordanian interlocutors agreed with Ambassador Reiss that Arafat is part of the problem, not part of the solution. Former PM al-Masri said that the conflict to Jordan's west has direct bearing on Jordanians given family ties and Jordan's history with the West Bank. The humanitarian suffering cannot be ignored, and the negative security implications for Jordan are huge. Masri said pushing both sides to implement the roadmap is key, and leaving Arafat as a figurehead may be the only way in the end to marginalize him. He said that Arafat is stronger when he's isolated, and opined that it would behoove the U.S. (in conjunction with the Arab states) to encourage the EU to withdraw European support in order to encourage change. "It is not an exaggeration to say that growing anti-U.S. sentiment is directly tied to the Palestinian problem." But he said the Arab states have the tools to strengthen alternative leaders in the West Bank and Gaza by building on social, cultural and economic ties. He said that Jordan and Egypt need to get over their fear about Palestinian criticism about getting involved. "We have the means, support, people there. We should be able to capitalize on this."

11. (C) During a roundtable discussion with university students to discuss reform, the bulk of the conversation focused on conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians and in Iraq. Students argued about the merits of continuing the fight against Israel. One young veiled woman of Palestinian

origin defended suicide bombings as legitimate resistance, indeed, part of a religiously-sanctioned struggle against Jews, to which Ambassador Reiss countered that such violence was not justified in Islamic teachings and only hurt the Palestinian cause. (The young woman was taken to task by another female student, who cautioned her to distinguish at least between Jews and Israelis.)

¶12. (C) Iraqi students attending university in Jordan hoped the U.S. would stay the course in Iraq, and sparred with Jordanian students during the meeting with Ambassador Reiss who criticized the U.S. role there as an "occupation" and demanded an immediate withdrawal. An exasperated Iraqi said a U.S. withdrawal at this point would be a disaster because they are needed to help stabilize the country. He questioned why Arabs felt justified criticizing the U.S. in Iraq when it was the Iraqi people who suffered under Saddam while the Arabs watched for 35 years. At this point, the Iraqis should take the positive things the U.S. can offer, ignore the negatives, and hope for the best in the end.

¶13. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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